

The tracks of agony and pain in imprisonment: sinuous pathways of writing

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Abstract— In this paper, we aim at analyzing the writing of subjectivity by means of the construction of memory from the circumscription of a place: jail. In this way, we are working with the book entitled *Memórias do Cárcere*, written by Graciliano Ramos, and we intend, through the investigation of certain traces evidenced in some passages, to understand to what extent the writing considered as a form of testimony of the author portrays the suffering referred to experience of custody in a prison institution. We concluded that the journey by the writing of these pages has an address and the author directly or indirectly wanted to share his bitter experience with those interested in knowing about it.

Keywords— Memory, Prison, Subjectivity, Violence, Writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

The prison institutions, since the earliest times in the history of mankind, can be considered complex and somber places which, although placed on the margins of society, are part of it. When we talk about these institutions, we automatically link them to crime and the person arrested, the two pillars that give support to the prison. These institutions represent the production of a kind of solution idealized by a social class whose immediate destination would be those who disobey the rules created by the ruling class. In a sense, they are the reflection of the impotence, in the scope of the human experience, to equate injustices; not by means of an equivalence of a way of living but by the submission of a human being to the apparatuses of the State occupied and represented by its humans.

Possibly, a consequence of the social structure in terms of the organization of society was the establishment of the principles and norms to be followed as the fundamental guarantee of the condition of survival and respect. That is to say, for human beings, to live in the system of social bonds, it is necessary for them to assimilate norms and behave according to the prescriptions contained therein. In order to ensure respect for the rules, punitive mechanisms were established for those who opposed or even infringed upon them. These rules vary from nature and historical contexts,

consequently providing their own configurations in the interpretation of an action as criminal or not.

It is not the purpose of this paper to deepen the history of prisons - there are already several treaties regarding this topic, such as *History of Prisons in Brazil* (MAIA et al, 2009), since we will focus only on the specific context of the imprisonment of a Brazilian man, Graciliano Ramos, condemned for thinking differently from the current political system and who, pressed by the memories that stir up suffering, left in his tracks a writing which depicts a crossing in prison. Even though the author of this writing has portrayed the role of writer, we can not fail to consider a particularity: these are grafts of memories produced as a function of an experience of prison confinement. It is this singularity that must be evidenced in the construction of the book, from the beginning to the end, that is, if we can speak of the beginning and end of a book of such density and complexity.

Thus, the author conceives one of his greatest works, *Memórias do Cárcere*, which, even posthumously, portrays the history of subjective sequels of a being who, having been imprisoned by an imposition of the State, leaves tormenting memories recorded which remain even after the liberation of the prison walls. In a certain way, when a prisoner is released from prison, his psychic universe remains for a long time confined to the

institution, because the prison has a kind of stickiness that adheres to the person, forever. That is, Graciliano used writing as a way of trying to untie the indestructible vestiges that the prison left to him, as a way to get rid of the terrible memories. Writing, then, represents, among other senses, a kind of elaboration that allows the being to distance itself from that experience, as far as possible. According to Farias et al. (2014), "violence produces a (...) kind of rupture that consists in the production of (...) vestiges and impressions, which may, depending on certain circumstances, be transformed into memory".

In this way, the present article aims at analyzing writing as a means of memory production related to prison, as well as understanding the story of the narrator. We are reminded of the uniqueness of Graciliano's writing about this place since, subjectively, he never considered him as a criminal, so for him his reclusion was a misunderstanding and a reflection of an authoritarian system. What Graciliano portrays about the prison in his writings has to do with a vision of imprisonment due to injustice, evidenced in the act of his incarceration. In this sense, writing can be a form of resistance, a denunciation of injustice, as well as, by sharing lived experiences, a form to alleviate suffering. Also, we consider jail as a place of production of memory in terms of the dynamics and social actors present in this place that create, then, a dynamism whose results are the memories, even if fragmentaed and silenced.

Bearing in mind that the text must be considered within the historical and political contexts of the time it was written, and mainly because of its agent, the life course of the prisoner, imprisoned, in his conception, unjustly, the present study becomes relevant because existing studies on the subject are constructed only under historical or literary lenses. Our focus, on the other hand, is to cast a glance with another lens, that of prison since it seems to be common practice, in the Brazilian imaginary, the conception that arresting is the solution for criminal actions. However, this logic is not a Brazilian creation, but rather the reproduction of secular procedures of torture, punishment and deprivation of liberty. Like many other modes of action, Brazil inherited from its colonizers the idea that the solution to certain situations is the imprisonment with restriction and deprivation of liberty.

The method of analysis will consist in taking the writer's writing about the daily life in prison, which in his memories enabled us to know certain nuances, hitherto invisible, in order to make clear the footprints that marked a trajectory due to his nonconformity, resistance and denunciation in being forced to confinement by his ideals and his way of thinking. Among the methodological

elements to be considered in the approach to the work, we will follow Ginzburg (2013), when he highlights two crucial elements for the study of narratives: narrator analysis and historical contextualization.

From the narrator's point of view, we are before a writer who has created characters in scenarios considered not only controversial, but pernicious to the political *status quo* of the country at a time when an authoritarian and coercive regime prevailed. In a way, Graciliano Ramos was considered an author *a la gauche*, which is why he should be promptly silenced and demoted as a citizen, for a "crime" in relation to which he was not even sentenced.

Concerning the historical contextualization, we will examine which hegemonic discourses in the period in question, the Era Vargas, in relation to the conditions of production of the book since, according to Ginzburg (2013, p.35), "violence is built on time and space" and the analysis must take into account the relations between the social actors and the processes present at the time.

Thus, based on a qualitative approach, we will proceed in a decontextualization of the book's memorial fragments to be analyzed in order to produce an understanding of the life of a human being in prison. It is these strategies of action through which we turn to produce a meaning among the possible multiples on the crossing of who, for many nights, witnessed the living in prison.

In this way, we are led to wonder what it means to write in the face of the pressure of agonizing memories that rekindle and incessantly actualize the experience of the prison in a kind of past that, paradoxically, do not pass.

II. ERA VARGAS: THE BEGINNING OF GLOOMY TIMES

From the authoritarian regime of 1930, the so-called Era Vargas began in Brazil, whose proposal was to annihilate the political and social issues inherited from the previous period. However, this dictatorial period was structured in three moments: Provisional Government, Constitutional Government and what they called *Estado Novo*. In the first moment, the concern was to revive the coffee industry, devalued in the crisis of 1929, while the Constitutional Government was busy organizing a new constituent for the country. The *Estado Novo* began in 1937, as the presidential campaign for the elections that would occur the following year and its main focus was on the economic policy, seeking to develop industries and companies in the country.

The cultural production in the country during the Era Vargas was quite abundant. According to Sodré (2004, p.627), “the phase of freedom, which is always naturally relative, inaugurated in the late 1930s, is closed at the end of 1935, when a phase of political repression begins”. That is to say, while the State was supposed to care for the rights of the citizens, an authoritarian and controlling policy was created that sought to limit society by depriving its ideas, that is, censorship, as well as deprivation of their liberty, with unfounded prisons, torture, exile, deportation and even death.

During this government, several Brazilian writers suffered reflexes of the Estado Novo dictatorial system, among them, Graciliano Ramos. His penury began in 1936 when, after refusing the “suggestion” to resign from the public office where he used to work on, he was arrested at his home, without any formal accusation by the State, remaining imprisoned for ten months and going through all types of misfortunes, until he was acquitted and released in 1937 for lack of evidence to support his involvement with communism. In that sense, we would like to ask: whom bothered Graciliano Ramos' ideas to the point of judging the power of his writing to be an uncontrollable weapon? Nevertheless, it is pertinent to point out that the deprivation of the right to come and go of a human being does not harden its spirit, as evidenced by the writings produced in prison by Graciliano and that continued until the death of that mind that took the sleep of those who feared that their ideas were widespread and understood.

Then, we would like to propose a reflection on the reasons why prison is understood as a space of deterioration of the human being. As we have already mentioned, we do not intend to delve into the history of prisons, because several authors have already set out to compose a detailed history on the subject. In fact, we seek to focus on imprisonment, in Foucault's conception (2008, p. 195), as “the general form of apparatus for making individuals docile and useful by means of precise work on their body” a device that is capable of curtailing rights and controlling acts such as eating, drinking, sleeping, in short, as a structure capable of demonstrating vilely what would be a social place of belonging, but in a depressed and demeaning way by humiliation. In addition to Foucault, Tuan (2005) demonstrated the relations of power that allow to delimit the place of each human being in society, that is, if the human being becomes a danger, as the vision of the Vargas government in relation to Graciliano Ramos, he must be removed from society so that it does not contaminate it. So we ask: is the human being who becomes a danger or are his ideas? No doubt the placid masters of power feel tormented by ideas and

as they can not destroy them, they punish their creator, in the vain hope that he will not produce something of this kind anymore.

On the basis of the above, we begin the construction of the analysis of fragments in relation to the subjectivity, captured in a writing whose main content is suffering allied with the feeling of injustice, always taking into account the inseparable relationship between experience and narration, and also the fact that “we call experience what can be put into account, something lived that not only is suffered but is transmitted. There is experience when the victim becomes a witness (SARLO, 2007, p.26)”. Thus, the practice in question has as its determinant to understand the justifications attributed to this experience, the circumstances related to imprisonment due to a political ideology and the internal pressures that mobilized the writer to narrate, as the author, his own crossing.

The book *Memórias do Cárcere* will be considered a dossier related to the innumerable passages marked by the circumstance in the prison, being configured a scene in which three acts slide: in the first, Graciliano Ramos occupies the position of actor, being at the same time, character. In the second, it appears as an agent of production of a writing which reveals in the recesses the pain and suffering of an experience of incarceration. And finally, in the third, it proves to be a living witness of a difficult crossing. It is important to point out, however, that the literature of testimony, as is the case of the book in question, is a nuance of the field of literature and in this way, causes the whole history of literature to be revised from the questioning of its commitment to the real. Still, one must take into account the distinction between “real” and “reality” as was thought by the realist and naturalistic schools. On the other hand, the “real that interests us here must be understood by the Freudian key to trauma, of an event that justly resists to representation” (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2003, p. 377).

III. MEMÓRIAS DO CÁRCERE: NARRATIVES OF AN IMPRISONED SOUL

As we take a brief look at the Graciliano Ramos' books, we notice that the most part of them are literary constructions, provided with characters, scenarios and fictional entanglements with beginning, middle and end, meticulously constructed by the mind of Graciliano. In what concerns *Memórias do Cárcere*, we do not have a story, but memories of the author, that, flooded by the suffering, has the prison as the scenario; that is, it is not a fictional story, but a story of a life that transpired between the lines of his writing.

The book is divided in four volumes, being: Travel, Primary Pavilion, Correctional Colony and House of Correction. In the first volume Graciliano narrates his trajectory from the threats he received as a public official of the State of Alagoas until the beginning of his imprisonment in the officers quarters, when later he was transferred aboard the ship Manaus, moments in which Graciliano describes with promptness all the dirt and the neglect with which they were treated: according to his own words, he was in “a pigsty, of course, it was as if we were animals” (RAMOS, 2011, p. 167).¹

In the second volume of the book Graciliano reports his arrival in the city of Rio de Janeiro, he denounces the terrible meals that were offered to them, describes the innumerable people he had met in prison, even though the atmosphere around them was that of violence and oppression, as well as he narrates the fusion of feelings that plagues him when he becomes aware that his wife will visit him.

In the third volume of his memoir, Graciliano brings us the scene of Dois Rios prison, on Ilha Grande, and his affliction for the change, since it was a place known for the precariousness and mistreatment of prisoners, evidenced by the discourse of a sergeant: “There are no rights here. Listen. No rights. Who was a great man, forget about it” (RAMOS, 2011, p. 69). In addition to the psychological torture, Ramos denounces the physical torture and inhuman treatment they were given when he had to choose between starving himself or eating rodent-infected food, which caused them severe pain. By trying to resist such inhumane treatment, Graciliano's physical body is gradually calling for help, so he is transferred to the detention house.

Finally, in the last volume, the author finishes his thoughts by telling us about the perceptions about himself, how he was physically weakened, and came to the conclusion that in fact this had been the intention of the government from the beginning, because in that way they would not be able to react to the state impositions.

Having detailed the structure in which the memories are available, we can make some considerations. There is in the book an author who is both narrator and character while the plot is his life. Because it is a memorial book,

we can observe aspects of the past based on facts that occurred in Graciliano's life, so that the author felt unconcerned in: “[...] walk left and right, jump in uninteresting passages, stroll, run, return to known places. I shall omit essential events or I will mention them at a glance, as if I see them through the small glasses of a binoculars, I will magnify insignificances, I will repeat them until I am tired, if that seems convenient to me” (RAMOS, 2011, 14).

When we consider Graciliano's writing not only as a memoir but also as a form of denunciation and resistance to the injustices for which he was being subjected, we note that Graciliano not even underwent a law process: “They showed no sign of submitting us to trial. And it was possible that they had already judged and served us punishment and we did not know anything about it. All rights, the last vestiges of them, were thus suppressed. We did not even know the forum that sentenced us” (RAMOS, 2011, p.102).

Still, we can see that Graciliano leaves traces of tormenting memories that annoy him because they allow, even after releasing the limits of the prison, that the person remains subjectively trapped in his memories: “Will this depersonalization be necessary? After submitted to such a regime, an individual is acquitted and sent away. Little is served by his acquittal: as being used to move as if he were drawn by twine, he will hardly be free” (RAMOS, 2011, p. 43), that is, although the author does not make use of the first person in the singular, and does “juggling to avoid it” - we recognize the denunciation of a pain that will never be released.

During the period in which he was imprisoned Graciliano sought, through writing, to reconstruct all the torment lived as a way of resisting in his uniqueness of human being, for when being arrested, regardless of whether committed crime or action considered criminal, once condemned every human being is equal, becoming a homogeneous class (FOUCAULT, 2008), fact evidenced in the speech of the sergeant of the prison of Dois Rios: “There are no big ones here. You are all the same” (RAMOS, 2011, 69). In this sense, memory and memory reports, according to Sarlo (2007), would be a “cure” of objectification, of depersonalization during the incarceration time.

Besides all the feelings of anguish and sadness, Graciliano so masterfully makes us understand his confused feelings, which translate into words, his most valuable tools, as a way to be expelled from his spirit: “[...] I felt stunned, as if I were punched in the head. I considered myself the author of several faults, but I did not know how to determine them. I vaguely repented of

¹ The passages from the book *Memórias do Cárcere* were translated from portuguese to english by the authors of this paper since the book was not translated to any other language.

harshness and injustice, at the same time supposed myself weak, slipping in useless condescension, and I wanted to stiffen my heart, to eliminate the past, to do with it what I do when I set a period - to scratch, to thicken the risks and transform them into blurs, suppress all letters, leave no trace of obliterated ideas" (RAMOS, 2011, p.35).

And once again he denounces the atrocity he experienced, when he said that "this blossoming of evil feelings was the worst torture we could inflict on that terrible year" (RAMOS, 2011, p 15).

During the months in which he was confined, he had for several times to discard his manuscripts as he was transferred from one prison unit to another, so he only began recording his experience and decided to narrate it ten years after his freedom; which for Benjamin (1994, p. 204) it is not a problem at all: "A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time". Thus, Graciliano gives us a clear indication that this singular work was about the truth of the elaboration of the trauma that he experienced. Erasing and writing are the testimonies of the desire of someone who made the choice for life in a kind of crossing compared to the destiny determined by Hades, portrayed by Virgil: "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta Movebo". It is as if Graciliano Ramos reflected that in the impossibility of moving authoritarianism, he tried to move what was within his reach with his writing: he demonstrated injustice by his imprisonment. This is the purpose of his writing: to illuminate the trajectory of clumsy human beings who were threatened by his ideas.

"- I have excellent memories, doctor. And I will pay for the hospitality that you have given me.

-Pay how? (...)

Telling everybody what happens on Ilha Grande (...) Yes, doctor, writing. I put it all on paper.

The deputy director stepped back, opened his eyes, and asked, frowning,

-Are you a journalist?

- No, sir. I write books. I'll make one over the Correctional Colony. Two hundred pages or more. You gave me a magnificent subject. A curious story, no doubt.

The doctor buried his hard eyes, his sharp face full of shadows. He turned his back on me and went away grumbling:

Those horses²...It's their fault that they send us people who know how to write" (RAMOS, 2001, p. 516).

In this way, his narrative was reconstructed by the memory images and memories that he possessed, as a form of elaboration since "to propose not to remember is similar to propose not to perceive a smell, because the memory, as well as the smell, affects, even when it is not evoked" (SARLO, 2007, p.10). Although he had built such a masterpiece, he was not able to finish it, having it been published posthumously, honoring the book title with the word "memories".

When we consider jail as a place of memory, in Nora's conception (1993, p. 13), we note that the book "is born and lives from the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, (...) because such activities no longer occur naturally. (...) Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de mémoire-moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned" in some way through writing.

We can conjecture, then, that the book *Memórias do Cárcere* gives us, through reading, the contemplation of the suffering and violence suffered by the collective memory of the individuals who were part of this narrative, since, according to Halbwachs (2006, p. 39), "our memories remain collective and are remembered to us by others". That is, collective memory is a structured and structuring foundation of social relations, and therefore, we never remember outside the context of social relations. Thus, it is in and through society that men construct memories.

Finally, in the process of writing these memoirs, Graciliano Ramos died. And curiously, the author dies when he was almost finishing his writings, even though at the beginning of the book he has already warned us: "I am going down to the grave, this ball of cases in many points will get entangled, I write with slowness" (RAMOS, 2011, p. 13). According to his son, the person responsible for the publication of the book: "he did not try to complete his Memories of the Prison" (RAMOS, 2011, p. 318). And then we realize that he has not tried to complete his memories because he can not "complete" or break free from his pain.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present article had the objective of analyzing writing as memory production related to jail in the book *Memórias do Cárcere* written by Graciliano Ramos,

² It is a way of cursing and offending someone.

taking into account approaches about the historical context in which the author was inserted, that is, the Era Vargas, a crucial fact to the understanding of the story, as well as he reports the torture and violence suffered in the prison units for which he was forced to pass.

In the construction of his memoir, we find a subject who needs to narrate his experiences and events as a way of elaborating the suffering and the pernicious feelings that affected him. In this sense, the narrator Graciliano Ramos incorporates into the history of Brazilian literature the figure of a reflective, nonconformist, resistant and denunciatory human being, in telling experiences of violence and barbarism. This narrator, in turn, feels the need to share his experiences by building a dialogue with the reader, which in turn must play its part in becoming active.

Although he made it clear in his writings that he disliked and thus endeavored not to use the first person of the singular, and thus did not exceed his “ordinary size”, Graciliano left us as his heritage a work that not only brings a critical vision of the events that occurred at the time, as it is a subjective testimony of a human being who had to leave all his pain registered as an attempt to escape it, since the more he tried to move it away, the closer he felt to it. Was it not the realization of this impossibility that prevented him from completing the work, since the memory caused by pain became inevitable?

Based on the above, we conclude with the reflection that Graciliano Ramos lived to write works such as *São Bernardo* (Saint Bernard), *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives) and *Angústia* (Anguish), but he wrote *Memórias do Cárcere* to live and portray the hardships of a human being who was arbitrarily and unjustly imprisoned.

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